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Out to sea

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Cargo is loaded on to the ship

OUT TO SEA

Exploring slow living, Leong Ka Tai documented his journey by cargo ship from Hong Kong to South America and the Caribbean. By Eunice Tsang

For over a month in 2013, veteran photographer Leong Ka Tai lived on a French cargo ship with his wife, travelling from Hong Kong to South America and the Caribbean. His aim was to explore slow living - definitely not something that Hongkongers do well. With the vigorous bombardment of polished images from the screens in our hands to the billboards on the streets, our ability to carefully observe has almost been eradicated. Every day on board, Leong would perform a little ritual, in which he dropped a message in a bottle into the ocean, a hopelessly romantic gesture, some would say.

Leong, founding chairman of the Hong Kong International Photo Festival and ex-president of the Hong Kong Institute of Professional Photographers, is a critically-acclaimed photographer whose work has been presented in international literature like *National Geographic* and *New York Times*. Clad in a Hawaiian patterned shirt and a pair of little round spectacles propped on his nose, Leong is amicable and humorous, often joking about his trip. "I was finishing up some work for an international photography festival, and just wanted to get away from everything," Leong explains of how he began his unusual trip. "I found this French freighter and thought it was a great chance to try out some slow living." He brought his wife along, and, when asked

LEONG KA TAI



Left to right: The Filipino crew on board, cutting each other's hair and out on deck

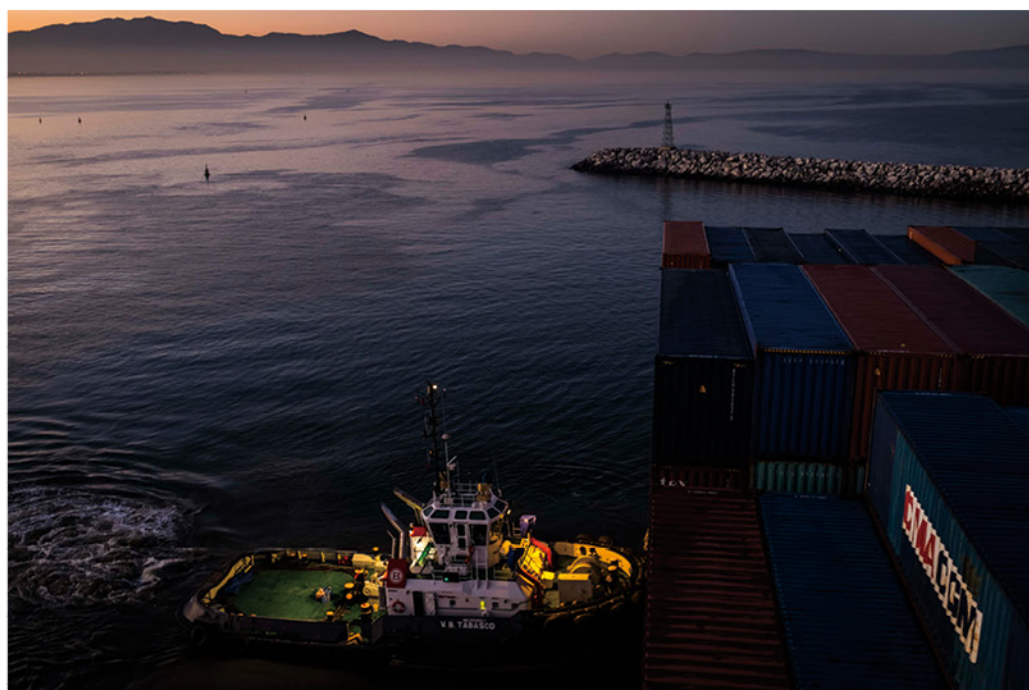
how his wife felt about the trip, he laughs, "It's a big miracle that we didn't fight or argue at all! I was prepared to be pushed into the sea by her." Armed with only one camera – a fixed lens Fujifilm X100s – Leong wanted to "go back to the basics" and explored the freighter every day, walking around the cabins and decks, observing his vast surroundings. "Actually, I was a bit surprised by how I could easily sit alone quietly for an entire day, and how fast a day passes, even when you're not really doing anything," Leong ponders. "Every day I would watch the sky and sea, that's all there is around you most of the time. The changes in the weather and sunlight fascinated me – every day is slightly different. The colours are ever changing, like the fog at night, the

sun at noon, the changes in colour of the water depending on which part of the sea we were in."

Leong's photos capture candid moments of the seamen during their leisure time – working out, drinking beer while watching television and giving each other haircuts. These men are away from home for months on end, with only the company of each other and these photos speak of their camaraderie. "I'm a very curious person. I like to check out what other people are doing," Leong laughs. "The crew members were from the Philippines, and they were very friendly, unlike the Romanian captains and officers who made it clear we weren't welcome in their club," Leong recalls. "They had a schedule and were pretty busy, but sometimes at night we

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The changing colours of the sea and sky



Village life in Ecuador

would chat over beer." Working through the night, the photos show them bathed in the warm glow of yellow lamps, surrounded by stacks of cargo and towering cranes. Unfamiliar scenes to most of us, despite how much we take for granted the objects contained by these red, blue and green metal containers.

One important part of his trip was his experiment in an alternative form of communication – the message in the bottle. "Nowadays, with our mobile phones, we can connect and reach each other so easily," he explains. "I wanted to try out a very primitive way of communication. I had a little ritual every day, filming each bottle as they were dropped into the sea." Inside each bottle is a personal message written by his friends, some of whom are artists. He also included a "cover letter" in Chinese, English and Spanish, with information on the purpose of the bottle, and his contact details. (He set up a new email account just for this.) "It's about primitiveness and probability," Leong continues, "Because the probability of picking up this bottle is so tiny, there must be some kind of luck involved in it, or fate. It's about how you establish a connection with a stranger."

On the cargo ship, Leong watched quietly as they traversed from Hong Kong to Kaoshiung, Ningbo, Shanghai, Qingdao, Busan, Mexico, then finally Colombia, where he decided to return on land. He and his wife travelled South America for a further four months, their first time ever on the continent. His eyes light up as he lists the names

of cities he visited, his favourite being in Ecuador. "You could go to the famous Galapagos Island," he says, "but we chose to go to a rural village up in the mountains." His photographs show a fascination with ordinary human life – people in traditional costume buying their groceries at a store; a kid with a smug face, apparently satisfied with his new haircut at the village salon; locals strolling or cycling on the cobbled pavement, drenched in the falling shadows of colourful houses.

Leong is now busy in preparation for his solo exhibition at the Hong Kong Design Institute, a mixed media exhibition featuring videos, objects, web content and photos, which will take place in March. It's no easy feat, having taken so many photographs, and hoping to encourage viewers to join him on his contemplation in slow living. He is even developing a mobile app that is a virtual simulation of his message in a bottle project, where users can send messages which, humourously, may not ever successfully be picked up. Out of his 32 bottles that he released into the sea, one has so far been retrieved. Eight months after his trip ended, he received an email from a marine biologist in Vancouver. "This is fate," smiles Leong. Who knows when the next bottle will be picked up, and by whom?

Over the Ocean, On the Road

- A Multimedia Exhibition by Leong Ka-tai

March 18th, 2016 - May 30th, 2016

HKDI Gallery, 3 King Ling Road, Tseung Kwan O

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